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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the design of a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) World Wide Web site to act as a living documents repository for university accreditation. Topics addressed include: instructional design and development of a functional flowchart; interface design; and interactive elements, including bulletin boards and suggestion forms. (MES)

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The Design of a University's SACS Accreditation World Wide Web Site

Abstract: The design of a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) World Wide Web site to act as a living documents repository for university accreditation is an integral aspect of the accreditation process. Due to the importance of this accreditation feature, careful consideration must be placed upon the World Wide Web site design. Such issues as a simplistic and navigable flowchart, comfortable interface, and interactive elements are imperative.

Introduction

The accreditation of a university within the United States of America is of the utmost importance. With accreditation acknowledgement, the university clearly states the superior quality of the educational programs on its campus and the students who choose to attend the university are offered a semblance of assurance concerning the level of education that may be received. Without accreditation, a university does not have the implication of status that is gleaned from the stamp of successful fulfillment of accreditation status. One such accrediting organization within the southern region of the United States of America is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The mission of SACS is clearly stated as

imperative towards the educational system. This mission statement states, "The mission of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the improvement of education in the south through accreditation" (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, http://www.sacs.org). Through this mission statement, the clearly defined goal of SACS is demonstrated.

The focus of SACS upon universities maintains the desire to view information dispersal to all levels within the university environment. This suggests that the importance placed upon faculty, staff and student involvement within the accreditation process be of utmost importance. As a response to this aspiration, universities are utilizing the information dispersal feasibility and expedience of the World Wide Web to accomplish such goals. The development of a World Wide Web (Web) site to maintain SACS accreditation documentation, as well as expedite availability of related documents to the university community, is a useful living document repository. Due to the importance associated with a SACS Web site, universities must focus upon issues of Web site design, which include navigation, interface, interactive elements and a multitude of other factors.

Design

Instructional design has been defined numerous ways over the previous years, but perhaps the most inclusive descriptions of instructional design is offered by Winn (1990) "Instructional design is a set of decision-making procedures by means of which the most effective instructional strategies are developed or chosen, given the outcomes students are to achieve and the conditions

under which they are to achieve them" (p. 53). From this description, the instructional design process is an inclusive process that maintains the integrity of the end product.

Design aspects are imperative considerations before beginning the development of any World Wide Web (Web) site. However, due to the extent of a SACS accreditation Web site, the design takes on even greater significance. After discussing the theoretical aspects of a SACS Web site with university administration, the next step was to review previously developed Web sites. Each Web site offered numerous strengths from which to draw. After carefully reviewing an ample number of SACS-related university Web sites, the development of a functional flowchart began to evolve.

Interface

The Web site interface is integral to the ease of use by the university community. Careful considerations of possible interface products were contemplated, but the simplistic aspect of Web page interface was decided upon. The interface is an important aspect to the aesthetics of the Web site. If careful consideration does not occur, the user will find the interface distasteful and will no longer desire to use this site. Therefore, the difficulty designing such a Web site will be squandered, due to the poor design implemented. The design aspects of a Web site are quite simplistic; careful consideration of navigability and information availability is paramount to the successful Web site interface.

The simplified vision of the university's SACS Web site aided the navigability and supported the desire of the university to offer informational documentation through a Web site that offered a sequential format to the user. With a graphically pleasant and textually light interface, the Web site develops an ease of structure which is pleasant to behold. Further, the use of "white space", the important aspect of allowing areas with no information to become a part of the structure, offers the desired effect of calmness and professional appeal to the Web site. Many times, the white space is forgotten in the desire to integrate as much information as possible for the Web site user. But the implementation of such tactics only aids in the user's confusion and feelings of discomfort. The final product objective must always be at the forefront of consideration when designing a Web site of such import. The focus is twofold: the university community must have access to the information contained within the Web site; and, the SACS COC representatives must have a clear understanding of the Web site's design so that the simplicity of the design will enhance the Web site's purpose and offer an aesthetic aspect of support and professionalism. The careful design of the Web site interface supports the university community and administration in efforts towards the establishment of a living documentation resource through which the informational documents are constantly available and updated.

Interactive Elements

Interactivity within a Web site is a useful format through which discussions and suggestions may occur. Two possibilities within a university's SACS Web site are bulletin boards and forms through which anonymous suggestions can be forwarded to appropriate administrative personnel, with no concern for repercussions. This interactivity allows the administration to make additions

to the Web site and to reformulate areas of concern or difficulty. Therefore, the interactive nature of the World Wide Web augments the communication between the university community Web site users and the administration in a positive fashion. The interactive nature of the World Wide Web focuses upon the appropriate inclusion of interactive aspects within Web sites. This inclusion may maintain a sense of interest and consistent revision to the Web site, while further delineating the roles of the university community within the SACS accreditation process.

Conclusion

Much thoughtful reflection and effort is put forth by numerous members of the academic community towards the successful accreditation of educational institutions. Creating a supportive environment in which the available knowledge has been carefully developed into a navigable Web site for use during the university's SACS accreditation is the goal of the Web site and the university. The university community endeavors to establish a living documents repository through which the aesthetic appeal of the Web site parallels the university community and its lofty goals pertaining to academic integrity and fraternity. One way to accomplish this goal is through an interactive Web site for a university's SACS accreditation. The discussion of such a significant aspect within the educational profession must be shared and further developed so as to maintain the highest regard for academic institutions.

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